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SUBJECT: CRITICISM OF CAUCASUS MUSLIM BOARD'S HANDLING OF
THE HAJJ

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¶1. (SBU) Prominent human rights activist Elchin Behbutov and two of his friends -- Bayram Sadikov, Hafiz Osman -- recently shared with us their views on the Hajj. The three had traveled together to Mecca, Saudi Arabia between December 21, 2006 and January 18, 2007 in order to participate in the most sacred Muslim pilgrimage. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Azerbaijanis are increasingly interested in the Hajj.

¶2. (SBU) Hafiz, a self-described moderate Muslim, said he had long been an advocate of religious tolerance and interfaith harmony and noted that he had participated in the State Religious Committee's November 2006 Conference on Interfaith Harmony at which the Ambassador spoke. (He applauded the Ambassador's remarks.) Hafiz told us he was privileged to have the opportunity to make the pilgrimage at least once in his life as it is the duty of Muslim men to do so. Hafiz recounted in detail his excitement and awe at being able to walk in the Prophet's footsteps and read aloud the Koran surrounded by millions of fellow believers. It was, he said, a moving experience. Behbutov showed us photographs from the travel.

¶3. (SBU) Turning to the logistics of his participation, Sadikov, however, echoed the sentiment expressed by Hafiz and Behbutov that the Sheikh Pashazade's Caucasus Muslim Board, which manages Azerbaijani participation in the Haj, was very poor. Sadikov explained that the Board has always arranged the Hajj through subcontracts with several travel agencies. The Board charges Azerbaijani pilgrims USD 2200, an extraordinary sum of money in Azerbaijan that would significantly limit the public's ability to participate in the Hajj. This amount covered transportation by charter airplane, meals, and accommodations in Saudi Arabia. When we asked these gentlemen how they could afford such an amount since they described themselves as "ordinary" citizens, Hafiz explained that he had a wealthy patron who financed the trip. (We previously heard that some affluent Azerbaijanis annually sponsor others citizen's participation in the Hajj.) Behbutov estimated there were 5,000 Azerbaijani citizens who participated in the Hajj in addition to several GOAJ security service minders who tagged along with the group.

¶4. (SBU) Azerbaijani pilgrims who could not afford the hefty fee could travel for USD 1600 via a Board-organized bus from the southern Azerbaijani city of Astara through Tehran, although this mode of travel took several days and was, according to Sadikov, extremely unpleasant. Hafiz and Behbutov said that the Board's arrangements in Mecca for Azerbaijani pilgrims were appalling. Behbutov commented that while the Board-arranged accommodations were atrocious, Sheikh Pashazade himself stayed in a five-star hotel while on the Hajj. Hafiz opined that Muslim Board Chairman Sheikh

Pashazade was responsible for the corrupt manner in which the pilgrimage was organized for Azerbaijani citizens. (In early April, the Muslim Board publicly dismissed several officials responsible for organizing Azerbaijani participation in the Hajj.)

15. (SBU) Hafiz added with an air of regret that the Hajj was obviously also being used as a business opportunity and that commerce and trade were part and parcel of the experience for many pilgrims. Behbutov commented that citizens from almost every other Muslim country were taken better care of by their respective governments than Azerbaijanis and that this was an embarrassment. Sadikov commented that Turkish and Iranian pilgrims paid between USD 1300 and 1600 to participate in the Hajj, considerably less than Azerbaijanis were charged by the Muslim Board. Sadikov explained that some Azerbaijanis chose to circumvent the Board and participate in the Hajj through Turkish organizations by flying via Istanbul on Turkish charter flights; at least, Sadikov noted, this ensured that they were well taken care of because Turkey did a good job of taking care of its Hajj pilgrims at a lower cost.

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